Best Practices for Reducing Student Collusion

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1.0 Executive Summary

In May of 2012, 279 students at Harvard University took the final exam for their Government 1310: Intro to Congress class. By the end of the year, nearly half of them would be under investigation for collusion.

As the answers to the take-home exam began to pour in, the professor and his teaching assistants noticed similarities between some of the responses. An investigation that started with 10 to 20 exams grew by the end of summer to include some 125 students.[1]

When the case was finally resolved in February of the following year, approximately 70 students were forced to withdraw.[2]

The story put collusion in the national spotlight, however it did precious little to help educators and administrators understand collusion and how to prevent it. Dubbed the "2012 Harvard Cheating Scandal" the story was framed entirely in the context of cheating without a deep look at the other variables that may have played a role.

That's because collusion is usually not a simple matter of students cheating out of laziness. Collusion is often caused by a lack of understanding of the rules, uncertainty about one's abilities, confusion about the assignment, or lack of teamwork skills.

Though unethical students will continue to collude, there are many things that schools can and should do to reduce the number of students who unintentionally cross the boundaries of ethical collaboration.

Such efforts will not only prevent students from facing disciplinary hearings and possibly having their academic careers dashed, but they will also help students create better work, improve their confidence and help them become better researchers.

1. (2012, August 30). Harvard Investigates "Unprecedented" Academic Dishonesty Case ....
Retrieved April 5, 2017, from http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2012/8/30/academic-dishonesty-ad-board/

2. (2013, February 1). Harvard Forced Dozens to Leave in Cheating Scandal - The New York ....
Retrieved April 5, 2017, from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/02/education/harvard-forced-dozens-to-leave-in-cheating-scandal.html

2.0 Collusion ≠ Plagiarism

One of the first steps to understanding collusion is to recognize that, even though collusion and plagiarism often have similar outcomes, they are quite dissimilar in nature and require different kinds of response and prevention.

Students require different skill sets to ensure they neither collude nor plagiarize. To avoid plagiarism, students need the basic skills and knowledge of how to use and integrate outside material into their work. Plagiarism, at its core, deals with issues of paraphrasing, quotation, citation, etc.

Avoiding collusion, on the other hand, requires students to have a fundamental understanding of ethical collaboration within the classroom. It deals less with citation and paraphrasing and, instead, focuses on human interaction. After all, interacting with a piece of writing is a much different process than working with a human being.

So, while collusion and plagiarism are often detected through the same means, preventing them requires strategies that are quite distinct from one another, as they stem from very different causes.

3.0 The Causes of Collusion

In 2004, Louise Dennis at the School of Computer Science and Information Technology at the University of Nottingham conducted a study that looked at students' views of collusion within the computer science field. [3]

Her findings were striking.

Only 10% of the students admitted to having knowingly participated in unethical collusion. However, when asked questions about certain scenarios, nearly a quarter (24%) admitted to having done something that was classified by the school as collusion.

This means that over half of the students who had colluded were unaware that they had violated any rules.

The survey showed that the interviewed students were not clear on the definition and boundaries of collusion and, when presented with examples of collusion, were unable to distinguish between permitted and unethical behavior.

When asked to cite reasons for why students might knowingly collude, the students ranked "They simply couldn't do the coursework" highest, followed by "They started too late and ran out of time" and "They couldn't keep up with the work" in second and third place, respectively.

If these reasons sound familiar, that's because lack of confidence in one's work and poor time management skills are among the most commonly cited reasons for committing plagiarism[4]. Dr. Dennis' study draws the same point with its plagiarism questionnaire.

However, as with plagiarism, there is a wide gap between what many students understand to be collusion and what it actually is. That gap not only helps to explain stories like the one from Harvard, but may also help schools find a path to significantly reduce the problem of collusion with little more than education.

3. (2004, December 7). Student Attitudes to Plagiarism and Collusion within Computer Science.
Retrieved April 6, 2017, from http://cgi.csc.liv.ac.uk/~lad/pubs/studentattitudes.pdf

4. "Causes of Plagiarism | Kent State University." http://www.kent.edu/writingcommons/causes-plagiarism.
Accessed 18 May. 2017.

4.0 Best Practices to Deter Collusion

When it comes to reducing collusion, the best approach is a three-pronged strategy that both educates students on the nature of collusion and disincentivizes them from engaging in it.

1. **Help Students Understand Collusion:** As Dr. Dennis's study shows, there is a broad gap between students' understanding of collusion and what it actually is. Helping students understand the boundaries of collusion prevents them from inadvertently crossing the line.

2. **Improve Skills and Confidence:** Reducing students temptation to knowingly or unknowingly engage in unethical collaboration is also key to deterring students from collusion. Schools can achieve this by structuring their academic environments so that they support ethical, original work. For instance: help your students build confidence that they can do their work, ensure they have access to adequate resources to which to turn when they need help with their writing, and assist them to learn time management skills so they don't rush to unethical solutions when under pressure to meet deadlines.

3. **Increase the Difficulty of Collusion:** Fewer people are willing to invest time and energy into actions that take more effort. Therefore, making collusion more difficult can serve as a powerful deterrent. If collusion is not an easy shortcut, then students will be less inclined to follow that path, whether they realize it or not.

To that end, there are several practical steps schools can take to reduce student collusion.

Provide Practical Guidance on Collusion

Though honor codes usually mention collusion as a violation of the school's policies, they rarely go into the detail of describing it and they even more rarely provide practical, real-world examples.

Scenarios such as the ones in Dennis' study offer a great, descriptive basis to help students understand collusion and what constitutes it. Giving students relatable examples of collusion, and counterposing those with examples of ethical collaboration can help them better grasp how your school defines the boundaries.

Provide Tutoring and Writing Centers

Students that are unsure about their writing or their grasp of a subject are more likely to turn to their peers for help. Obviously, this may present a dilemma if the people from whom they are seeking advice are not experts in the topic. Giving students an accessible, legitimate, and authoritative way to get help, whether it's with their writing or with the class itself, will encourage them to go straight to those resources, rather than turning to their peers.

Bear in mind, though, that tutors and writing centers can create their own collusion problems. It's important that those working in the centers are well-trained in the boundaries of what kinds of help they can provide. Still, an authoritative place from which to get assistance for a class will prevent students from turning to their classmates, resulting in reduced collusion.

Focus on Feedback

Bear in mind, though, that tutors and writing centers can create their own collusion problems. It's important that those working in the centers are well-trained in the boundaries of what kinds of help they can provide. Still, an authoritative place from which to get assistance for a class will prevent students from turning to their classmates, resulting in reduced collusion.

To that end, Turnitin Feedback Studio can prove to be a valuable asset. It supports instructors in providing targeted feedback quickly and efficiently so that students receive the guidance they need on their writing. This feedback allows student to become much more confident that they can meet their instructor's expectations, reducing collusion.

Craft Collusion-Resistant Assignments

Assignments that have to be completed in class make collusion almost impossible. However, most classes have at least some assignments that must be completed outside the classroom, leading to greater vulnerability.

In those cases, it's important to craft assignments that resist collusion. This means creating assignments that do not have a singular right or wrong answer, but rather, call on students to express their knowledge in a way that is unique to them. Collusion is much more likely on assignments for which the responses are expected to be, more or less, the same.

For example, have students connect a piece of literature to something in their lives. This kind of exercise would prevent them from simply copying one another. Another possibility is to have students take up different arguments on a given subject. Although it probably would require more work, instructors could even give multiple assignments to the same class.

In addition, one technique that's extremely useful in fighting collusion is to require students to submit multiple drafts of their work. Not only does this help students learn how to manage their time better, but it also makes it impossible for students to inappropriately share ideas and thoughts and drop them into a final draft at the last minute. Requiring students to submit each draft also deters students from colluding with ghost writers and paper mills. If an outside party needs to write each version of a paper, then the cost will be much more prohibitive. Of course, reviewing multiple revisions from each student increases the instructor's workload. Again, this problem can be mitigated with the right technology that can help instructors assess student work more efficiently.

In general, it requires much more effort, time, and occasionally money, for students to collude on assignments for which each revision is required. And, as it has been said before, the more difficult collusion is, the less likely students will do it.

Use the Power of Peer Review

Finally, it's important to remember that students wanting help from their peers is not, by itself, a bad thing. In fact, peer review skills are incredibly useful and students will probably need to call upon them many times throughout life, especially when in the workforce. This is why it is so important for them to understand the often misunderstood line between peer review and collusion.

Offering students the opportunities to collaborate ethically can teach them about that line, which will help them avoid collusion. This can be done easily through peer review exercises, which can be assigned through online supports such as Turnitin Feedback Studio's PeerMark.

Lessons that are designed to differentiate collusion from collaboration can be worked directly into the exercises, as well. Well-done peer review is a powerful tool to help students learn how to seek and give the advice and assistance they want from their fellow students in a way that doesn't cross the line into collusion. They will benefit from knowing how to ethically work together on solving problems, improving their writing, and becoming prepared -- collaboratively -- for the future.

5.0 How to Identify & Manage Collusion

All of that being said, collusion, unfortunately, is still going to happen. Just as with plagiarism and other academic integrity issues, a school is practically guaranteed that no amount of prevention will stop every incident of impropriety.

Dealing with the occurrence of collusion requires a two-pronged approach that looks at the problem beyond the simple aspect of cheating.

That approach includes:

1. **Detection:** Obviously, collusion must be identified if it is to be confronted. Educational institutions need tools and processes in place to detect collusion as it happens in order to take action against it.

2. **Correction:** Institutions must also have concrete processes on how to address incidents of collusion when they are detected. These processes, however, should not only address collusion as a potential cheating issue, but also as a potential skills issue.

Identifying Potential Collusion

The first prong requires a combination of technology and instructor intuition. On the technology front, institutions need a tool that can identify potential cases when papers duplicate text not just from sources found on the Internet or in publications, but also from other students' papers.

To that end, Turnitin Feedback Studio proves to be an ideal support since it compares student writing not just with the other essays in the same class, but also with all student papers that have been submitted to its vast archive. This gives educational institutions full confidence that they can identify situations either where students might be colluding with each other in a class, or where students might be using papers written for the same courses from previous years. Obviously, the more papers a school submits to Turnitin's database, and the longer the amount of time that school submits those papers, the more safeguards it has against the collusion problem.

Turnitin Feedback Studio is also a powerful tool for dealing with the growing problem of cross-institutional collusion. With many schools having similar courses and similar assignments, students are often able to use the internet to get assistance on completing assignments. While some help can be a positive thing, it often crosses the line into collusion and can be difficult to detect when only comparing work within a class or school. More gravely, flagrant instances of students buying recycled from students at other institutions is difficult to detect without an assist from technology like Turnitin's cross-institutional comparison database.

However, as with any technology, thoughtful implementation and combination with instructor intuition is critical.

Intuition can certainly detect possible incidents of collusion. In the Harvard case, for example, the collusion was originally detected because of a simple typo that was repeated across multiple student's responses. Instructors and assistants can often tell when things sound familiar and find overlap in several students' writings that seems more than coincidental. However, technology can serve this detection function at a much quicker pace, without fatigue or distraction.

5. "Typo at Root of Cheating Scandal, Letter Reveals | News | The …." 12 Sep. 2012, http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2012/9/12/platt-letter-reveals-scandal/. Accessed 6 Apr. 2017.

Managing & Correcting Instances of Similar Student Work

Discerning between intentional and unintentional collusion is not always easy. Still, one can usually get a good good idea by looking at what text has been duplicated, how much of it overlaps, and to what degree it is similar.

Cases of clear and deliberate collusion should definitely be treated as disciplinary matters. Some issues are so egregious that there is no alternative.

Other situations, however, may be the result of a lack of skills or understanding. As we saw in Dr. Dennis' study, many students don't think they've committed collusion when, in truth, they have.

Intuition and sympathy play an most important role when it comes to determining the response to a potential instance of collusion when student intent is not clear. When deciding how to proceed, instructors and institutions need to assess what the possible causes were for the behavior.

Processes designed to handle such circumstances might work better if they lend sympathy to students with first-time offenses. Rather than sending them before disciplinary tribunals, institutions should consider providing students with the education and skills development they need to avoid similar situations in the future.

Offering remedial programs on collaboration can be a great step in steering many such students down a better path. They'll learn the skills they are lacking and these programs will also ensure that they have no excuse if a second incident should occur.

Collaboration is a skill that is not always straightforward and obvious. Occasionally, it needs to be taught directly to a struggling student. Additionally, it's useful to remind ourselves that the purpose of school is not to punish students for what they do not know. Rather, at least part of school's purpose is to impart to students wisdom on how to grow from their mistakes and learning so that they may develop into the best people they can be.

6.0 Conclusions

In the end, successfully reducing student collusion requires taking several steps.

Instructors equipped with the right technology can help detect collusion, while policies, planning, and education can help students understand the difference between collaboration and collusion and will discourage them from crossing into the territory of the latter.

Tackling collusion requires a holistic approach through which institutions must stand firm on academic integrity standards, while acknowledging that the ethical issues are not always the simple culprit. Instead, skills deficits may lead students to follow this route unwittingly and unintentionally. Consistently treating all students accused of collusion as criminals may not be appropriate in all cases.

Since the primary causes of the problem are a lack of knowledge and know-how, the solution to the issue of collusion lies in the core competency of the academic community itself: education. Through well-designed assignments, emphasizing engagement in the school culture through feedback and peer review, providing quality resources for writing assistance, and boosting student self-confidence in their writing, educational institutions can do much to prevent against collusion.

Of course, schools will need the right technology to undergird all of these efforts. These systems should not only have comprehensive content against which to identify potential cases of collusion, but they should also afford students the ability to correct mistakes and improve their work. Integrating technology with well-designed policies, best practices, and caring, professional instructors will make for a powerful combination that will certainly enhance learning, support academic integrity, and preserve institutions' reputations.

About Turnitin

Turnitin is revolutionizing the experience of writing to learn. Turnitin's formative feedback and originality checking services promote critical thinking, ensure academic integrity and help students improve their writing. Turnitin provides instructors with the tools to engage students in the writing process, provide personalized feedback, and assess student progress over time. Turnitin is used by more than 26 million students at 15,000 institutions in 140 countries. Backed by Insight Venture Partners, GIC, Norwest Venture Partners, Lead Edge Capital and Georgian Partners, Turnitin is headquartered in Oakland, Calif., with international offices in Newcastle, U.K., Utrecht, Netherlands and Melbourne, Australia.

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